



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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A lifetime of acts of resistance: Denise O'Brien and Larry Harris create a future for generations

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

For almost 50 years, Denise O'Brien and Larry Harris have worked together to do what's right. They preserve and improve the soil health on their farm and fight for thriving rural life for future generations.

For their lifetime of work, the couple from Atlantic, Iowa, is recognized with the Center's 2023 Seventh Generation Award.

Both were raised in Atlantic, and after heading different directions across the U.S., came back to create a legacy.

A different way of farming

Their way of farming started with Larry's interest in organic gardening. They didn't want to grow corn and soybeans or use chemicals, they wanted to have a diversified farm and focus on small grains.

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Larry Harris and Denise O'Brien have built a strawbale house on their farm. The sustainable structure is made of local products, and lime plaster captures carbon. "We're going to live out our life in a carbon sponge, that kind of fits us," Denise said. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

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Changes to crop insurance regulations demonstrate support for conservation

By Kelsey Willardson, kelseyw@cfra.org

Crop insurance provides a safety net for farmers, protecting their operations from loss due to natural perils such as drought, frost, excess moisture, pest infestations, or disease.

While essential for many farmers, the rules regulating crop insurance have often been at odds with conservation practices. Thanks to recent changes by the

U.S. Department of Agriculture's Risk Management Agency (RMA), the implementation of conservation practices supported by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will no longer affect crop insurance coverage.

To qualify for federal crop insurance, farmers must follow production methods designated as Good

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Editor's note

By Rhea Landholm, rheat@cfra.org

Last month, I had the pleasure of interviewing our 2023 Seventh Generation Award winners, Larry Harris and Denise O'Brien.

I visited them on their farm north of Atlantic, Iowa, where we talked for two hours at their kitchen table, surrounded by memories. After hearing their story, I told them I was in awe with all that they've done.

Denise mused, "How did we do it all?" Then, she said it really came down to their teamwork—her taking the role as activist and Larry taking care of the farm and

the kids—as well as their rural community, neighbors, and family.

One example was that she said before leaving on those long trips, she would make a casserole and put it in the freezer. But, when she got home, the casserole wouldn't be eaten because neighbors had brought over enough food for the kids to eat.

What a good example for why we live in rural communities and why we work toward thriving small towns.

With all the information I collected in those two hours, I could



only publish a portion of the story here in our newsletter. Be sure to check out the blog with even more on our awardees, at cfra.org/blog.

Crop insurance regulations, continued from page 1

Farming Practices by the RMA. These regulations, for example, don't allow the use of farming methods that reduce yields. Use of those practices would result in farmers forfeiting their ability to make claims in the event of losses.

These limitations were troublesome for farmers deploying conservation practices that could create a temporary decrease in yield, such as cover crops. While cover crops may initially have a negative impact on yield, they benefit farmers in the long term by improving soil health and water quality. Feedback from farmers regarding this issue led RMA to adopt all NRCS practices as Good Farming Practices.

Correcting the disconnect between RMA and the conservation methods supported by NRCS is an important step toward a future



Implementation of conservation practices supported by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service will no longer affect crop insurance coverage. | Center file photo

where farmers can readily incorporate conservation into their operations without putting their crop insurance coverage at risk. This change opens the door for more farmers to engage in conservation that will impact rural communities

for generations to come.

For more information on crop insurance for organic operations and for specialty crop producers, visit cfra.org/publications for fact sheets.

Paper & e-news

This newsletter is available both electronically and in print. To receive it online, visit cfra.org/sign-up or email outreach@cfra.org.

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Future for generations,

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“I realized that industrial agriculture was going the wrong direction,” Larry said.

They raised dairy cows until 1996, and were able to feed small grains to the cattle. They also organically planted an apple orchard, strawberries, asparagus, and raspberries.

They focused more on soil health and worked toward a profitable bottom line.

“Actually, we have always sought how to work in balance with nature,” Denise said. “The type of farming we have done over the years has been an act of resistance because we’ve gone against mainstream agriculture.”

Deciding their future forward

In the early 1980s, when the farm crisis erupted, Denise and Larry were asked to speak about alternative agriculture at a conference in Des Moines.

“There was a panel taking place before us. I’ll never forget that,” Denise said. “We were in the audience, we hadn’t gone up to the front yet. And, these people, the banks were taking their sheep away. The audience was in tears. And, Larry and I were going, ‘what?’ We felt sheepish going up to talk about planting strawberries.”

That evening they made a decision.

“We made up our minds,” Denise said. “Larry would stay home and take care of the kids and I would go out on the road. That started my career as a farm activist.”

The work of an activist

Denise started going to meetings in Des Moines. Then, the couple helped start the Progressive Prairie



Denise O'Brien waters bedding plants in her high tunnel. She and her husband, Larry Harris, got involved with the Center through the Small Farm Energy Project in the 1970s and have followed its policy and agriculture work since. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

Alliance and the Farm Unity Coalition. Later, Denise served as a board member of Prairie Fire, then worked as the director.

She then served as chair of the National Family Farm Coalition.

In 1995, Denise got involved in United Nations’ Women’s Conference focusing on U.S. land owned by women. Upon return, Denise continued the work by starting a nonprofit, Women Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN).

In 2006, she ran for secretary of agriculture in Iowa. Denise then stepped down from executive director at WFAN and spent a year in Afghanistan as an agriculture advisor.

Today, she’s working to strengthen the Democratic party in Iowa. She is the chair of the Cass County Democrats.

Meanwhile, at the farm

Today, the couple is focusing on building a strawbale house. Their daughter and son-in-law will eventually purchase the 17 acres of property and move into the main house.

In the meantime, Larry and Denise are sharing the infrastructure that’s built on the farm with others, including young farmers needing a high tunnel.

“I guess we look at our land as everybody’s land,” Denise said. “It’s not something that is ours because it was never ours to begin with. The land was occupied by the Ioway and the Pottawatie and taken from them in the 1800s.”

An award of a lifetime

Denise and Larry say being awarded with the Center’s Seventh Generation Award is humbling.

“We are just doing things the way we thought we should,” Larry said. “There are a lot of people who are just as deserving.”

They truly are working to preserve the land for future generations, including their three children and eight grandchildren.

“Hopefully as we transfer the land to the next generation, we’ve instilled in them the principles and the philosophies of caring for the land,” Larry said. “Our legacy is that we’ve lived our principles and it’s based on the land ethic of thinking about the seven generations to come. Native Americans thought about and considered their impact on the earth and we want to honor that.”

“We are trying to leave the land as good or better than when we acquired use of it,” added Denise.



By taking proactive steps, like attending community training events, you can help a sustainable and equitable food system. The Southwest Iowa Local Foods Summit is one such event, and will return in fall 2024. | Photo by Kylie Kai

Empowering communities: steps to enhance access to local foods

By Deborah Solie, deborahs@cfra.org

Local foods are essential for promoting health, supporting local economies, and fostering community engagement. How can you enhance local food access within your hometown?

As a community member, you have the power to support local foods and work together with others to make them more available. Your efforts support local farmers and provide access to fresh, nutritious foods.

Anyone can make a difference. Explore these initial steps to start the process of engaging with your local food system:

- 1. Education:** Learn about local food infrastructure through workshops, seminars, and online resources. The more you know, the better able you are to communicate with your community.

- 2. Networking and collaboration:** Build partnerships with local farmers and community organizations to strengthen the local food network.

- 3. Advocacy and support:** Advocate for initiatives that promote access to local foods, such as farmers markets, community gardens, and food recovery programs.

- 4. Skill development:** Participate in training programs on gardening, cooking, food preservation, and sustainable agriculture to develop practical skills for growing, preparing, and sourcing local foods.

- 5. Community engagement and equity:** Play a role in community events, food drives, and volunteer

opportunities to support equitable access to local foods for all residents.

Community members work every day to create vibrant, nutritious, and equitable food systems to help their neighbors. In Shenandoah, Iowa, for example, the food pantry is using grant funds to purchase from local farmers, providing fresh fruits and vegetables for their customers and another market for producers. In Atlantic, Iowa, the community has established a Grow Another Row program, which encourages growers to add one more row of vegetables that can be donated to programs addressing food insecurity.

By taking proactive steps, like attending community training events or joining local groups focused on food insecurity and increasing access to local foods, you can help create a sustainable and equitable food system.

Business growth enables family-owned auto repair shop to give back to its community

By Liz Stewart

Not everyone is fortunate enough to have the opportunity to make their childhood hobby a full-time career. But Cody Cahill has been working on cars his whole life, and now he gets paid to do what he loves.

Automotive repair started as something Cody and his father did together when he was a child. As an adult, Cody worked out of the back of his pickup for about a decade until he decided it was time to take the plunge and open his own storefront. His mother, Elizabeth Cahill, joined him as a co-owner of the business.

Cody found a home for Afterhours Repair, LLC, in North Platte, Nebraska, in May 2021. About a year later, he moved to a bigger place because the business was growing fast. In August 2022, he received a loan from the Center for Rural Affairs to help with working capital and buy equipment.

Becky Parker, loan specialist with the Center, helped Cody and Elizabeth throughout the loan process and has been there whenever they need guidance.

“They are wonderful clients and great business owners who would do anything for anybody,” said Becky. “Afterhours Repair is a family-oriented business, and when you go in there, they treat you like family.”

Along with the move to a larger location, Cody hired five employees to help him keep up with the steady flow of business. Together, they work on everything from general maintenance to engine replacement. Because of the shop’s growth—in part due to advertising—Cody was able to quit his job a little over a year ago and work at the repair shop full-time.



Afterhours Repair owners Elizabeth Cahill and Cody Cahill moved to a larger location and hired five employees with the help of a Center loan. They are pictured on either side of Becky Parker, Center loan specialist, who is based out of North Platte. | Photo by Kylie Kai

Cody and Elizabeth have also made a difference in their community by holding a school supply drive every summer. They buy basic school supplies like notebooks, pencils, pens, crayons, etc., and at the beginning of the school year they deliver them to schools in the area.

“It’s important to be involved in the community,” said Cody. “If I can help out where I can, it makes me feel good. There’s a lot of stuff that some people just can’t afford, and if I can help I’ll do everything in my power to do so.”

Cody loves what he does, but it’s hard work, he said, and he has some honest advice to others looking to start their own businesses.

“You’ve got to be patient,” he said. “It takes time and it’s stressful. You have to commit to it

100%, and if you can’t or won’t do that, don’t do it at all.”

Cody says a good support system makes a big difference, too, and he recommends others reach out to the Center if they are on the road to starting their own operations.

“Becky has been fantastic,” Cody said. “She bent over backward for us to help us get what we needed. She’s been wonderful all the way around and we’ve built a great relationship with her.”

Are you in need of an extra boost for your business? An average borrower needs less than \$30,000. Contact your regional loan specialist for information on how to increase sales or add equipment to your business. Find yours at cfra.org/lending-staff.



Solar energy projects can provide needed habitat requirements for crucial pollinator species leading to enhanced local pollination services and higher crop yields, especially for pollinator-dependent crops. | Photo by Center for Pollinators in Energy

Using solar to fuel pollinator conservation

By Val Ankeny, valeriea@cfra.org

As solar development continues to gain popularity for producing clean energy and reducing utility costs, staff members at organizations like The Bee and Butterfly Habitat Fund are hoping to further maximize those benefits through innovative use of land both under and around solar panels.

Pete Berthelsen, the fund's executive director, has spent his career designing, establishing, and managing high-diversity habitats containing wildflowers species. His work has produced benefits for pollinators such as bees, butterflies, and birds, as well as improved soil health, water quality, and food sustainability, along with other environmental benefits.

"We will take an acre of pollinator habitat wherever we can get it," Pete said. "Then we strive to make that acre the best it can be to produce the most benefits out of that piece of ground that we can."

With careful planning and design, land under and around solar panels can be used for the co-location of solar with crops, grazing, beekeeping, pollinator

habitat, and farm or dairy processing to maximize its use.

To make the connection between solar and pollinator habitat stronger, The Bee and Butterfly Habitat Fund, which has team members in Nebraska, South Dakota, California, Pennsylvania, and Missouri, launched the Solar Synergy initiative nationwide in March 2023.

The program has enrolled nearly 30,000 acres in less than a year. It aims to tackle the unique challenges and opportunities that exist with utility-scale solar by working with project developers and landowners to create pollinator-friendly habitats using two different seed mixtures that are established under the solar panels and then around the perimeter of the solar site.

Pollinator-friendly habitats are gaining popularity with solar developers. In Illinois, for example, Summit Ridge Energy is developing 26 community solar projects, a majority of which are designed to include pollinator-friendly habitats. Similar to other midwestern states, Illinois has seen a significant decrease in prairie and native grasslands, which has subsequently

contributed to a loss of pollinator populations. Solar energy projects can provide needed habitat requirements for crucial pollinator species leading to enhanced local pollination services and higher crop yields, especially for pollinator-dependent crops.

The Solar Synergy Program also works with solar developers to document carbon sequestration gains on the solar site. The Bee and Butterfly Habitat Fund will test the soil and if gains are recorded, they could be monetized with carbon credits. Additionally, staff regularly monitors sites to document the changes in both pollinator habitat and populations and work to connect each site with a commercial beekeeper to increase U.S.-sourced honey production.

Pete said the Bee and Butterfly Habitat Fund can help establish pollinator habitat on sites larger than 2 acres that are on private, public, or corporate lands as well as providing support for smaller solar projects.

To learn more about the organization and the Solar Synergy Program, visit beeandbutterflyfund.org/solar.

Rural Farmers Market Handbook available in English and Spanish

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

With spring comes thoughts of planting, followed by a summer of farmers markets.

In addition to selling fruits, vegetables, meat, and other farm products, farmers markets often include prepared food, arts and crafts, cut flowers, baked goods, and handcrafted items. They also provide a gathering place for the community.

For those looking to start a market or considering vending, a new resource is available: the Nebraska Rural Farmers Market Handbook in both English and Spanish.

“This handbook brings together ideas, inspiration, and insight from farmers markets across Nebraska,” said Deborah Solie, project associate with the Center for Rural Affairs. “It is the culmination of research, hands-on experience, and interviews with

market managers, vendors, and professionals.”

Included in the toolkit are resources such as market manager best practices, how to plan a farmers market, how to prepare for the market season, and improving and measuring market performance. Also of note are handouts for vendors on marketing, booth set-up, licensing, and more.

“Markets began as a way to do business, but have evolved into a way to connect people with their communities, food producers, and the land that surrounds them,” Deborah said.

The toolkit can be found at cfra.org/ne-farmers-market-handbook.

Partners on this project include the Center for Rural Affairs, Buy Fresh Buy Local Nebraska, Nebraska Extension, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Northeast Iowa RC&D.



A toolkit for farmers market producers and managers can now be found on the Center's website. While this resource has some Nebraska-specific information, quite a bit of the text includes advice and inspiration for farmers market managers and vendors across the country.

Farmland ownership, continued from page 8

The initiative was challenged in court repeatedly. Supporters successfully defended the law until 2006, when a judge ruled that the ban on corporate farming violated the interstate commerce clause of the U.S. Constitution.

Despite ultimately being struck down, Initiative 300 shaped Nebraska agriculture for a quarter century. It also had a lasting impact on ownership trends, especially in the livestock sector, where Nebraska retained more independent cattle feeders and has fewer corporate-owned hogs than neighboring states.

While these issues of farmland ownership—be it foreign, corporate, or driven by wealthy

investors—each requires distinct solutions, they all circle back to a fundamental question: who owns the assets that make up our community?

The Center has long held that our communities are strongest when the people who work our farms, ranches, and small businesses have a chance to share in their ownership. Increased external investment in farmland, whether foreign or corporate, diminishes these opportunities for rural residents.

In contemporary debates about the ownership of farmland, it is also important to acknowledge that the land that is Nebraska today is also the past, present,

and future home of Native people. Native people lived here long before today's concerns about corporate or foreign ownership of land, eschewing modern notions of individual land ownership entirely.

Although the landscape of this debate has changed over the decades, the Center remains committed to advancing strategies to increase opportunity for all rural people to earn an ownership stake in local farms, businesses, and homes. There is no single solution to ensuring this happens. Rather we must pursue diverse strategies at the individual, local, and policy-making levels while centering the value of local ownership throughout.



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A future for generations

Seventh Generation Awardees fight for a thriving rural life

From the desk of the executive director:

Who should own our farmland?

By Brian Depew, briand@cfra.org

The question of who should own farmland has re-emerged in Nebraska, sparking discussions both in the media and in the legislature.

At the Nebraska Statehouse, the recent session saw the introduction of a bill aimed at restricting the ownership of farmland by certain foreign nationals. The proposed legislation mandates reporting of land purchases by foreign nationals and, in cases tied to foreign adversaries, calls for divestment or sale of the land. Similar bills have appeared in other states, reflecting concern

about national and food security. Critics argue they are also rooted in xenophobia.

Meanwhile, Nebraska's Flatwater Free Press undertook a series investigating farmland ownership in the state. Their findings revealed surprising trends, including the Mormon Church emerging as the largest purchaser of farmland in the past five years. Tech giants like Facebook and Google also top the list, acquiring land near urban areas for conversion to data centers. A corporation associated with the governor ranks among the top buyers as well. Well-known figures such as

Bill Gates and Ted Turner also continue to expand their farmland holdings in the state.

The issue of farmland ownership is not new to the Center for Rural Affairs. Concerned by a surge in absentee corporate investment in farmland, particularly in the Nebraska Sandhills during the 1970s, the Center advocated for a ban on agricultural investment by non-family farm corporations. This effort culminated in the successful 1982 ballot initiative known as Initiative 300, one of the nation's strongest anti-corporate farming laws.